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POSITIONING YOURSELF FOR A FUTURE IN THE RANGELANDS

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ABSTRACT

This paper explores rural business conditions, change and work opportunities in related areas in Australia's rangelands, and highlights the qualities, skills and knowledge that are sought by employers and are perceived to be critical to success in the rangelands. The need for life-long learning is also highlighted, and some short and medium-term priorities for skill development in the rural industries are identified.

INTRODUCTION

Significant change is anticipated in the nature of enterprises and their operating environment in Australia's rangelands over the next 5-10 years (Taylor 2002). Increasing skills and knowledge through formal and informal education and training is a widely recognised and valued strategy for building capacity to manage change, and for positioning oneself for success in the future.

Taylor (2002) reports stakeholder perceptions of the personal qualities and knowledge required for success in the rangelands in 5-10 years time. Taylor (2003) has also identified skill and knowledge gaps among producers and agency staff that could potentially limit the capacity of these groups to respond to the likely changes and to position themselves for a strong future in the rangelands.

This paper explores some of the short- (i.e. next 12 months) to medium-term (i.e. 5-10 years) opportunities for people in the rangelands, and links these to the medium-term expectations of producers/managers and agency staff in particular. The paper uses preliminary data from a survey of business confidence and employment opportunities in Australia's rangelands. These data are based on a postal survey of over 150 producers (24% return rate) and a telephone survey of senior staff of primary industry and natural resource agencies (e.g., CALM WA, NSW DIPNR, NSW Agriculture, NT DBIRD, NT DIPE, PIRSA, SA DLWBC, QDPIF, QDNRM&E, WA Ag, WADE, etc.) and large pastoral companies (e.g. Australian Agricultural Company, Consolidated Pastoral, Colonial Agriculture, Heytesbury Beef, S. Kidman & Company, Stanbroke Pastoral Company, etc.).

BUSINESS CONFIDENCE

Almost all corporate rural enterprises (largely cattle or beef focused) considered business conditions to be 'strong' in the past 12 months, and expect business conditions to be 'somewhat stronger' in the next 12 months. This is consistent with Rabobank's recent (i.e. March 2004) and wider rural confidence survey that highlights beef as the most optimistic of all rural sectors (Rabobank 2004).

Of the family enterprises, business conditions in the past 12 months were mostly considered to be either 'strong' (50%) or 'weak/very weak' (36% respondents), with a small proportion (14%) believing that conditions were 'neutral'. Those who indicated that conditions had been 'weak/very weak' (i.e. all wool/sheep producers) expect business conditions to be about the same over the next 12 months. Those who thought that past conditions had been 'strong' (i.e. beef or mixed enterprises), expect business conditions in the next 12 months to be 'about the same' or 'stronger'.

However, this does not mean that one sector will face more problems than another, or that there will be few, if any problems. Almost all rangeland enterprises expect to face continuing pressure(s) in the next 12 months. The pressures represent both threats and opportunities, and, in declining order of importance, are perceived to be:

- seasonal conditions (e.g. W NSW, SW Qld)
- government regulations and imposts (examples given include NLIS, QA, EMS, health and safety compliance, etc.)
- rising costs
- lower prices
- other (e.g. not able to find suitable stock, lack of water in the Lower Darling, etc.).

Taking a wider view, and with respect to opportunities, it is clear that adjustment is transforming the rangelands in much the same way as the rest of rural Australia (Barr 2004). Over the period 1996-2001, and based on farmer/producer entry and exit levels, Barr (2004) has identified four patterns of adjustment:

- a) tightly held (i.e. below average entry and exit rates) e.g. Cape York, S Qld, SW NSW
- b) consolidation (i.e. low entry and high exit rates) e.g. channel country
- c) churning (i.e. high entry and exit rates) e.g. northern and western Australia
- d) fragmenting (i.e. high entry and low exit rates) e.g. arid areas of SA and NSW, SW Qld.

Although caution is required, recent adjustment patterns, together with expected business conditions and industry optimism, can be used to highlight geographic areas of employment opportunity.

EMPLOYMENT OPPORTUNITIES

Vacancies can arise through new jobs (i.e. employment growth), job changing (i.e. changing jobs but remaining within the same occupation), and job openings (i.e. through workers leaving an occupation). National data on vacancies are available for the broad sector of livestock farming (which is largely in, but not restricted to, the rangelands) (DEST 2004). In this sector, short-term employment growth has been in decline over the two years to May 2003, and the likely future medium-term employment growth is expected to decline (DEST 2004). Job changing is expected to provide 62% of vacancies and job openings 38% of vacancies (DEST 2004). Of course, this will vary with region, and may be linked to the patterns of rural adjustment identified above.

People are not hiring and will not hire staff in areas where business conditions have been 'weak' or 'neutral' and where conditions are not expected to be much better over the next 12 months. The vast majority of these respondents were wool or sheep producers, and they indicated that they had shed or will be shedding staff over the next 12 months. Seasonal conditions (e.g. drought) were an impediment for some pastoralists, but health and safety obligations and employment conditions (e.g. loadings) were the most common barriers to hiring cited by industry respondents. In the case of agencies, the common barriers to hiring were changing government priorities, reduced budgets and/or limited industry funds.

From the feedback, and assuming that weather conditions do not deteriorate dramatically in the short term, there will be a significant number of positions available in the rangelands in 2004-2005:

Grazing (family and corporate) enterprises

In areas where business conditions have been strong and are anticipated to be stronger in the next 12 months, a significant number of enterprises will be hiring staff. The majority of the large

pastoral corporations surveyed anticipate hiring to maintain staff numbers, with a few hiring to support recent property acquisitions. Given recent reports in the media of difficulties in filling rural positions (e.g. Watt 2004), it seems that demand exceeds supply in this area. Survey respondents anticipate the following vacancies over the next 12 months:

- Stockmen/farmhands
- Head stockmen
- Managers
- Property development officers
- Environmental managers.

Agencies

Some of the agency positions will be new (i.e. funded with industry or government funds), but the majority will be to replace people who have moved on or retired. The intent of any planned hiring generally appears to be to maintain staff numbers, although some states (e.g. Queensland and South Australia) anticipate some small growth in staff numbers. As at April 2004, only NSW agencies anticipate some shedding of staff, and this is largely due to changes in agencies such as NSW Department of Infrastructure, Planning and Natural Resources and NSW Agriculture. For example, the latter will be combined with a number of other agencies (covering forests, fisheries and mineral resources) from July 2004 to form the Department of Primary Industries, and some reduction in overall staff numbers is anticipated. Overall, the changes in NSW could result in significant redundancies, and if so, it is likely that supply will exceed demand and there will be few additional opportunities for agency employment. However, survey respondents elsewhere in Australia anticipate the following vacancies in the next 12 months:

- Pastoral/rangeland officers and inspectors
- Rangeland extension officers
- Regional planning officers
- Sustainability/sustainable management officers
- Natural resource management/nature conservation advisors
- Natural resource management/community development facilitators
- Production (e.g. wool, beef cattle) specialists
- Rangers
- Land management/Indigenous land management officers
- Researchers
- District and regional managers
- Pest/weed management officers.

Carmel Wagstaff's paper (this volume) lists further rural-based employment and career opportunities, while other significant opportunities will occur in the rangelands in the mining and tourism industries. Indeed, in a number of rangeland areas, the wages, facilities and conditions offered by the latter industries are attracting people away from traditional rural employment.

Turnover of staff is a characteristic of the rangelands. The average annual rate of net exit over the period 1996-2001 is about 5% in the rangelands (Barr 2004). Average annual entry rates are around 4.5%, with projections suggesting a slow, steady net decline in population in the rangelands over the next 25 years (Barr 2004). In areas dominated by the grazing industry, average entry age is high and has risen significantly over the last 15 years (from 35 to 41 years) (Barr 2004). This in part reflects the widespread trend of almost three times as many young people (15-24 years) leaving country areas than arrived in these areas in 2001 (Barr 2004). It follows that ageing will become an increasingly important issue for the grazing industries.

It is clear that the major challenges will be to a) attract and retain good people, and b) to upskill experienced people who are already in the rangelands and who have commitment to the rangelands.

QUALITIES SOUGHT BY EMPLOYERS

In response to a survey question about the qualities and skills that would be sought in new employees to be located in the rangelands, the following responses were offered:

Station work

- positive attitude (i.e. want to work and want to work in the rangelands)
- experience (i.e. remote areas, livestock, basic mechanics, etc.)
- independence, but also willingness to work in a team
- reliable and responsible (i.e. safety conscious)
- practical
- motivation and initiative
- common sense
- problem solving
- honesty
- willingness to learn
- willingness to comply with requirements (e.g. wear safety gear)
- qualifications (e.g. Certificate or above, with ChemCert, etc. desirable)
- basic stock and mechanical skills.

Communication, people management and administration skills were also identified, but these were usually associated with higher level jobs (e.g. head stockman, station manager).

Experience of the bush (even for only short periods such as vacation work) and the grazing industry were valued, but not seen as essential. Several potential employers (corporate and private) noted that a broader experience/skill set would be valuable, and that if many of the qualities listed above (and especially a positive attitude) were held, then knowledge and technical skills were not as important, as these can be developed through informal and formal training.

A number of the corporations also noted that they have to recruit more and more from urban areas. In these cases, there has been a need for induction programs to develop basic skills and to 'weed out' those who appear to be deficient in other desirable qualities.

Agency work

- qualifications (i.e. tertiary – broadly based and specialists, with specialists understanding where their area of knowledge fits into businesses in the region)
- experience (broadly based, and especially rangeland experience, also land management, grazing industry experience, etc.)
- positive attitude/empathy towards the rangelands
- communication and facilitation skills
- integration and synthesis skills (i.e. integration of information from different sources)
- people management skills (i.e. comfortable with/relate to a wide range of stakeholders from producers to scientists)
- operational / practical skills (e.g. first aid, 4WD, use of fire, etc.)
- sound knowledge (especially technical skills relevant to production and environment / sustainability, and including rangeland ecology, landscape function, holistic management, economic implications of technology / recommendations, etc.)

- organisational and project management skills
- resilient
- independent, self directed/starter, self confident.

The need for qualifications and experience was emphasised by most agency respondents, with some acknowledging that even vacation/ practical/ work experience in the rangelands was seen to be a significant advantage to applicants for agency positions. However, some might argue that this is not enough.

FURTHER TRAINING – AN EXPECTATION OF EMPLOYERS

From the survey, training and further education are widely seen by the grazing industry as important to improve competitiveness, foster innovation, ensure compliance with regulation, quality assurance, etc., and to retain staff. Agencies are undertaking training to improve their effectiveness and efficiency, ensure compliance with legislation, duty of care, etc., and to retain staff. Both groups of employers expect staff to be willing to learn (through informal and formal training).

Grazing Enterprises

All of the pastoral corporations and 90% of family enterprises surveyed indicated that they would be undertaking staff training over the next 12 months. Those producers who anticipate hiring over the next 12 months all indicated that finding suitably skilled or qualified people, and people who want to work in remote areas, are the major impediments to taking on new people. These issues have recently attracted media attention in the cities (e.g. Watt 2004).

The main areas of training anticipated over the next 12 months in family and corporate pastoral enterprises include (in no particular order):

- Finance / business skills
- Computer skills
- Livestock handling and herd improvement (i.e. breeding, nutrition, etc.)
- ChemCert, OH&S, etc.
- Pasture identification and management, grazing management
- Leadership and personal effectiveness skills (e.g. time management, communication, etc.)
- Land and environmental management, property planning and development
- Marketing
- Estate and succession planning.

Agencies

Among the agencies, almost all (i.e. 95%) respondents anticipate continuation of 'in-house' / 'on-the-job' training and some support for professional development, although budget constraints may limit the scale of staff training and further education in some states. A number of respondents also indicated that there would be at least continuing (and perhaps growing) support for further study, such as part-time postgraduate coursework and research degrees.

The main areas of agency staff training and further education anticipated over the next 12 months include:

- Information technology and computer skills

- Cultural and stakeholder awareness (especially indigenous and cross-cultural training), and engagement of stakeholders
- Facilitation skills
- Communication (i.e. presentation, report / grant writing, etc.) and media skills
- People management and leadership skills
- Regional planning, water management and fire management skills
- Livestock production (for NRM/environmentally trained people)
- Natural resources management (for production trained people)
- Project development, management and evaluation, contract management
- Operational / practical skills (e.g. defensive and 4WD driving, OH&S, etc.).

ALIGNMENT OF PROPOSED TRAINING WITH PERCEIVED SKILL GAPS

Taylor (2003) identified a number of knowledge and skill deficiencies in most producers and agency staff that could limit their capacity, in the medium term, to respond to expected changes in the nature of rangeland enterprises and their operating environment. Training proposed in the short-term by enterprises and agencies will address some of the skill gaps, but insufficient attention is being given in the following areas to skill development to meet medium-term needs:

Grazing enterprises

- environmental management systems and certification
- multiple-use management
- sustainable production systems and landscapes
- awareness of global and national trends influencing the rangelands
- legislation and regulations
- stakeholder values, perceptions and aspirations for the rangelands.

Agencies

- sustainable production systems
- stakeholder values, perceptions and aspirations for the rangelands
- environmental management systems and certification
- multiple-use management
- awareness of global and national trends influencing the rangelands
- business management and planning.

The limited activity in the above areas may be due to a different focus of training (i.e. retrospective vs prospective, or short vs medium term skill needs), a lack of awareness of the importance of the above skills, and/or a lack of suitable education and training products. New industry-responsive short courses and postgraduate coursework programs that Rangelands Australia / The University of Queensland have introduced this year will go some way towards meeting the latter need. These courses are specifically designed to meet prospective skill and knowledge needs, to extend the learning pathway in rangeland management, and broaden the options for a career in the rangelands.

CONCLUSIONS

Positioning yourself for a future in the rangelands requires:

- an understanding of:
 - the likely changes in enterprises and the expectations of rangeland users and managers, and
 - where the job opportunities lie (in a geographic sense and in terms of the skills in demand)
- a willingness to learn and to continue learning (informally and formally)

- a determination to strengthen the critical personal qualities and knowledge that are fundamental to success in the rangelands (see Taylor 2003).

The information presented on the qualities sought and the training proposed by employers provides sound guidance about the expectations of those wishing to embark on a career in the rangelands, and those seeking advancement.

It is an exciting but challenging time to be working and living in the rangelands. There are now a number of employment agencies specifically dealing with job opportunities in the rangelands, and a growing number of more relevant educational products and services available in the rangelands.

There are plenty of opportunities for a bright future in the rangelands, and these should be well within your grasp if you have a positive attitude to change and a willingness to learn!

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